

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 11 | Issue 1

Article 13

1-1-1994

Davis, THE EVIDENTIAL FORCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Douglas Chrismar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Chrismar, Douglas (1994) "Davis, THE EVIDENTIAL FORCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol11/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

has given us certain commands supernaturally while denying that we are morally bound to carry them out. This surely cannot be a position Kant intends us to embrace. Kant's only purpose in mentioning pure rationalism at all seems to be the rhetorical one of cushioning his evident denial of pure supernaturalism."

6. *The Conflict of the Faculties* 19/10, henceforth cited as CF. See also *Critique of Pure Reason* A748-50/B776-8.

7. E.g. "What is Orientation in Thinking?" 301/142. Kant goes on to recommend pure rational belief for practical as well as theoretical reason.

8. E.g. R 94, and the preface to the second edition.

9. CF 77/44, emphasis added.

10. "(Historical belief is) its mere sensible vehicle (for certain people and certain eras), it is not an essential part of religious faith" (CF 63/37). R 102/111 and other passages like it can be read as making the point that historical faith can have its special power *only* as the vehicle of pure religious faith.

11. CF 75/43.

12. See R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," in *The Existence of God*, edited by John Hick (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 246. See also R. M. Hare, "The Simple Believer" in *Religion and Morality*, edited by Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973), pp. 406ff.

13. R 135n/126n. At the time when the very form of the church is dissolved, this so to speak contingent necessity might cease, see R 126, and 112. Kant makes a similar point in *The End of All Things*, 338/82. Until that point, Christ "brings to the hearts of his fellow men their own well-understood wills."

14. CF 115/63.

15. *The End of All Things*, 338/82.

16. *Metaphysics of Morals: The Doctrine of Virtue*, 162/486.

17. See R 97/105.

The Evidential Force of Religious Experience, by Carolyn Franks Davis. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. Pp. ix and 268. Cloth, \$55.00.

DOUGLAS CHISMAR, Ashland University.

The recurrent interest in the epistemic value of religious experience has created a need for someone to patiently and systematically sort out the many different issues, questions, and kinds of data which might be brought to bear on the topic. Carolyn Franks Davis has done just this in *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. The work is a presentation of her graduate research done at Oxford under Basil Mitchell and, later, Richard Swinburne. It is an excellent piece of philosophical analysis, combining careful conceptual reflection with a review of relevant material from the fields of cognitive and social psychology.

Franks Davis is clearly committed to the value of religious experience as a form of evidence for the truth of theism. "For all the mishandling they have received, religious experiences are an essential and highly valuable source of evidence for many religious claims" (p. 250). Much of the book is devoted to responding to the various attacks upon the epistemic value of religious experience by Flew, Mackie, Freud, *et al.* The process of developing responses leads Franks Davis to a cautious statement of the properly limited epistemic role of appeals to religious experience. Rather than developing an argument from religious experience, she follows Swinburne and Mitchell by incorporating the appeal to experience into a larger "cumulative case."

Franks Davis begins with religious language issues, arguing for a form of "critical realism" regarding the models of metaphors employed in religious language. Maintaining that "irreducibly metaphorical utterances can themselves state truths about the world" (p. 10), she rejects the view that religious experience is necessarily ineffable (a belief which might have made this a very short book). Turning to the sticky question of defining religious experience, she prefers to cast her net widely by defining six aspects or categories of religious experience: the interpretive (paranormal events), quasi-sensory, revelatory, regenerative, numinous, and mystical. She makes use of these categories quite often in the book, recognizing that mystical or ecstatic experiences must be handled differently than the phenomena of everyday religious life.

An important focus of the book is upon the role that interpretation plays in religious experience. The author argues for an "incorporated interpretation" view which recognizes "interpretation we perform unconsciously to transform the stimuli with which we are constantly bombarded into intelligible experiences of recognizable concepts" (p. 27). Franks Davis cites the work of cognitive psychologists such as Jerome Bruner, Leon Festinger, and Schachter and Singer to show, in response to the "vicious circle" challenge ("the claim that because religious experiences involve interpretation in terms of religious doctrines, any argument attempting to justify those doctrines by an appeal to religious experiences must be viciously circular," p. 142), that interpretation occurs in *all* perception and thus does not uniquely vitiate the epistemic value of religious experience. "'Unconscious interpretation' would only be good grounds for a challenge if it could be shown (i) that the set which influenced the experience incorporated incorrect rules of inference or (ii) that the set was of a type which generally leads to misperceptions" (p. 154). Neither appears to be uniformly the case.

The author can thus agree with views such as that of Stephen Katz that all religious experience inherently involves interpretation: it is impossible to separate interpretation from "the given." Like Katz, she cites this interpretive activity as a reason to reject a "perennial philosophy" as well as other shaky

syntheses of the various kinds of experiences. Yet, surprisingly she ends up, with Zaehner, Smart, and Underhill, arguing for a "common core," a "broad theism" which she finds to be present even in such unexpected places as the Buddhist tradition. Her arguments at this point seemed quite shaky and speculative, often involving a second-guessing of traditional interpretations. A valuable principle does come forth from this exercise, viz., the tenet that the evidential force of religious experience varies inversely with the specificity of the claims it is called upon to support. The "finer points" of working historical religions must turn elsewhere for support (p. 191).

The real action in the book comes when the author moves to discuss the various challenges to the epistemic value of religious experience. She notes that religious experience arguments have tended to suffer from three kinds of defects: (i) they move too quickly to the Judeo-Christian concept of God, (ii) not enough attention is given to empirical research and alleged counter-explanations, and (iii) they frequently attempt to base a highly ramified system of beliefs upon fairly narrow lines of argument. Franks Davis is especially strong in responding to the second defect. She divides the typical challenges into three categories: *description-related* (where the subject has shown poor ability to remember or articulate his experiences), *subject-related* (where the subject has been shown to be in a "set" or situation likely to lead to unveridical experiences), and *object-related* (where background evidence causes us to regard it as improbable that the object of the experience has been veridically perceived).

In a well-documented chapter, "The Reductionist Challenge," the author sorts through research from cognitive psychology and attribution theory in order to respond to a whole series of alleged counter-explanations of religious experience, such as hypersuggestibility, deprivation, sexual frustration, drugs, dreams and hallucinations, the operation of defense mechanisms, regression, cognitive need, maladjustment (and, in general, mental illness), and natural histories of religion. I found especially lucid her comments about the difficulties involved in isolating "religious" individuals or behavior for study, a problem which appears to cause some damaging biases in experimental design. Readers who have followed philosophical debate about religious experience while not keeping up with the empirical studies of religious behavior will find this section especially rewarding.

There are two positive aspects of Franks Davis' discussion which I would have preferred that she carry further. First, she repeatedly warns that a religious experience argument can do little on its own. Since religious experience is linked with "a complex pattern of cognitive, perceptual, and personal factors...any argument which does it justice must take that complexity into account" (p. 4). Following Swinburne and Mitchell, the author proposes a "cumulative case" approach to arguing for theism. In a complex interplay,

the appeal to religious experience is made more plausible (or "probable," following Swinburne) by traditional arguments for the existence of God, but is rendered less plausible by such lingering difficulties as the problem of evil or the atrocities committed by religious people. It seems to me to be quite realistic that one's view of the status of religious experience should be influenced in this way by broader philosophical issues surrounding theism. One wishes here, as in Mitchell's writings, for a closer definition of a successful "cumulative case." The complexity which gives rise to the notion of a cumulative case seems also to leave it an elusive concept, definable only by equally hazy illustrations.

Secondly, Franks Davis offers a novel application of the "cumulative case" concept by acknowledging that *non-theists* may also seek to build "cumulative challenges" against religious experience. Unresolved philosophical difficulties with theism in general may render probable naturalistic interpretations of religious experience where such interpretations would not normally, in themselves, be conclusive. Since Franks Davis believes that Swinburne *et al.* have done a satisfactory job of responding to these background objections to theism, she concludes that there is no reason to prefer these dubitable naturalistic counter-explanations. In fact, in line with Swinburne's "principle of credulity," religious interpretations should be preferred until naturalistic explanations can be found for *all* alleged religious experiences, something Franks Davis believes cannot be achieved.

In arriving at this conclusion, however, I believe the author glosses over another important form of the cumulative challenge. This is what I would call the "cumulative counter-explanation" challenge, which holds that given any religious experience Z, and a record of successes in reducing individual religious experiences in the past, it is probable that Z can be naturalistically defeated by either challenge A or B or C, etc. To her credit, Franks Davis seeks to avoid the simplistic (and all too common) reply to reductionist challenges that since no one counter-explanation fits *all* the cases of religious experience, some such experiences *must* have evidential force. Yet she never really acknowledges the cumulative effect that successful reductions may have upon the skeptic's attitude toward the remaining experiences.

On two separate occasions the author attempts a brief but unsatisfying response to this challenge. First, she argues that the sheer number of alternative available *pathological* explanations does not increase the probability that all cases of religious experience can be counter-explained:

Although none of the four types of 'pathological' reductionist challenge has wide application to religious experience, it might be objected that if they were combined, most religious experiences would be defeated by at least one of them, and so the argument from religious experience would fail. The combined challenge is unlikely to have so much force, however. Pathological

personality variables tend to be present in clusters (people are often anxious, insecure, *and* hypersuggestible, for instance), and many subjects of religious experience escape all of them; and it is clear that the other types of pathological factors (e.g., hallucinogens), whose presence is much easier to detect, are absent from the vast majority of cases of religious experience (p. 223).

In other words, the clustering effect limits the evidential force of there being many pathological forms of reduction. Nor, second, does she believe the *non-pathological* forms of counter-explanation have a cumulative force:

Atheists such as J. L. Mackie admit that no natural history of religious experience so far developed can adequately account for the phenomenon of religious experience as a whole. He is confident, however, that in combination they could provide 'an adequate and much more economical naturalistic alternative' to religious explanations, so that even psychologically sound religious experiences do not escape the reductionist net. But Mackie offers no such account himself. Presumably the combined theory would have to be extremely complex... However, it would still be difficult to show that this was a complete account. In fact, most theists would agree with Mackie that each natural history discussed above 'correctly identifies factors which have contributed to some extent to religion', but that is far from admitting that together they constitute a highly probable and complete reductionist account of religion (p. 230).

Mackie, it is alleged, goes beyond the evidence represented by past reductionist successes in claiming that *all* religious experiences are vulnerable to reduction.

This response seems too quick and optimistic, however. Unless one places a tremendous weight upon the principle of credulity, to claim that religious experience has "evidential force" for others as well as the experiencer is, in my view, to incur an obligation to at least show that there is not a "trend" of successful counter-explanation. Otherwise, such a trend would make it probable that the remaining experiences *can* be reduced just like the others have been. That is, successful religious counter-explanations may have a cumulative effect, at least in terms of affecting the plausibility of believing that some religious experiences will survive reduction. Franks Davis is to be praised for drawing attention to the complexity of these appraisals; perhaps her book will serve as a stepping stone to a full response to the cumulative counter-explanation challenge.

Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith, by M. Jamie Ferreira. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. Pp. 168. \$39.95 (cloth).

CAROLINE J. SIMON, Hope College.

Professor M. Jamie Ferreira's *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* brings an impressive array of resources to bear on the